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AUTHOR	Albert, Lawrence S.
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ABSTRACT

If being a competent small group problem solver is difficult, it is even more difficult to impart those competencies to others. Unlike athletic coaches who are near their players during the real game, teachers of small group communication are not typically present for on-the-spot coaching when their students are doing their problem solving. That is why any tools or techniques teachers create to prepare students for those challenges will be important in supporting their competence. The Competent Small Group Communicator Instrument is one such tool. There is a history of tools for assessing groups and their members, each with its own focus and theoretical foundation. Steven Beebe's tool (the SGC Instrument) harks back to McBurney and Hance's work in the 1930s, and before them, to John Dewey in 1910. This paper reports on a field test of this instrument in a small group class taught by the educator/author last spring. First, the paper identifies the expectations with which the test was approached, and then it discusses some findings and conclusions. To extend the field test reported in the paper it might be useful to add the revisions suggested by students' comments and retest the instrument and to examine various methods of teaching both students and instructors to use the instrument with optimum reliability. (NKA)

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Using the Competent Small Group Communicator Instrument to Assess Group Performance in the Classroom

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Lawrence S. Albert
Morehead State University
l.albert@moreheadstate.edu
606-783-2510

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Introduction

If communication competencies can be ranked according how difficult they are to learn and demonstrate, surely small group problem-solving competencies are among the most difficult. Many of us know individuals who are clear thinkers and excellent communicators but who struggle to meet the challenges of small group problem solving. Those challenges include defining problems clearly, gathering essential information, creatively exploring alternatives, and employing explicit and agreed upon criteria to test alternative solutions; challenges that furthermore must be met within an interpersonal context of equitable participation, listening, management of conflict, supportive relationships, and real consensus. The reason we sometimes fail to demonstrate these small group competencies is not that we are generally unskilled communicators, but that the required behaviors are complex, interrelated, and mutually adaptive, which makes small group problem solving difficult to enact.

If being a competent small group problem solver is difficult, it is even more difficult to impart those competencies to others. Unlike athletic coaches who are near their players during the real game, we teachers of small group communication are not typically present for on-the-spot coaching when our students are doing their real problem solving. All we can do is prepare them as best we can to meet the task and interpersonal challenges they will face in the group setting. That is why any tools or techniques we create to prepare students for those challenges will be important in supporting their competence.

The Competent Small Group Communicator Instrument is one such tool. There is a history of tools for assessing groups and their members, each with its own focus and theoretical foundation. Steven Beebe's tool, which I will call the SGC instrument, harks back to McBurney and Hance's work in the thirties, and before them, to John Dewey in 1910. It embodies a great deal of our collective wisdom about the nature of effective group problem solving.

In this paper I will be reporting on a field test of this instrument in a small group class I taught last Spring. First I will identify the expectations with which I approached this test, and then I'll discuss some findings and conclusions.

I began with the assumption that a group assessment instrument has its greatest value as an instructional device to help students acquire group problem-solving competencies. A tool such as the SGC instrument can be used for grading students or for course assessment. However, I wanted to investigate its usefulness for helping individual students become more skillful communicators. One reason for doing so is that even if an instructor's immediate goal is to code student behavior, it would be advantageous to do so with an instrument that the students themselves could understand and use. If I had a choice between using a coding tool that was

so arcane that only a highly trained professional could use it properly and one that the students themselves could use, I would pick the latter because students would be more likely to understand, accept, and use the instructor's evaluation when it is presented to them. And so student usability is, in my view, a meaningful test of an assessment instrument.

Therefore my first expectation was that the SGC instrument would not just identify competencies but help students acquire them. Based on my use of previous instruments I wondered how well it might first, lead students to observe and reflect on their own behavior in a group, and second, lead them to observe and reflect on other members' behavior in order to note absent or deficient competencies.

The second expectation I brought to my task was that it should reinforce the rater's understanding of the problem solving process by leading members to see the overall structure of a group discussion.

The third expectation I brought is that the instrument should be practical to use: i.e., that it not require much training time or be confusing to use.

I brought three expectations, then, to this task, as a classroom teacher interested in considering how well the SGC might help students in a small group course: (1) it should help students learn group problem-solving skills. (2) it should help them follow group process, and (3) it should be practical to use.

Method

To determine how well the SGC met my expectations I brought it into a 300-level small group communication course I was teaching during Spring of 2002. This course was a distance learning version of the course, using interactive television. The course had 26 students enrolled at one site, 3 at a second site, 5 at a third site, and 6 at a fourth site. The students were primarily sophomores and juniors. I brought the instrument in during week 13 of a 16-week course that met once a week for 2 ½ hours. By that point in the course we had dealt with a range of topics, including small group problem solving. The topics I covered had been, in this order:

The challenges of small group communication
Defining effective and ethical group participation
Preparing for meetings
Group problem-solving techniques
Striving for Consensus
Managing verbal and nonverbal messages

Developing the team
Preparing to lead
Practicing group leadership
Following the parliamentary model
Managing conflict productively
Fostering critical and creative thinking
Assessing performance

In the remaining two class sessions I covered specialized discussion tools and we had a final performance day.

On the day I introduced the SGC instrument I provided a handout explaining that we were going to learn to use an instrument for evaluating group problem solving since the students' final assignment was going to be a problem-solving discussion. I also gave them a copy of the SGC instrument. I organized a group of volunteer members at 3 sites and arranged the rest of the class in 9 groups and assigned each group one of the competencies on the instrument. The volunteer group then held a problem-solving discussion that everyone could see and hear on the large monitors in their classroom. After the group made its decision I asked each of the nine observer groups to report. During the reports I tried to make sure the class had a clear understanding of each competency. Then we had a discussion of the group's overall problem-solving process. This was the class's training on the instrument, which lasted approximately one hour and a quarter.

During the next class I reminded each group that its final assignment was due in videotape form in a week and I said that I would award every person a few extra credit points if they watched their tape, used the SGC to evaluate it, and wrote about their experience using the instrument. Specifically, I asked them to describe any ways in which they found it useful, any problems they saw with it, and any suggestions they had concerning it.

Results

Twenty seven students completed the extra credit task and received their bonus points for simply turning it in. To interpret the data I sorted their remarks according to the three types of expectations I stated earlier: impact on understanding individual behavior, impact on understanding the group process, and practicality of use.

A large group of students commented about how the instrument guided their analysis of individual behaviors, either their own or others. Eleven students made remarks like *"I think it really*

helped me realize what type of small group member I was. It helped me see what I can do to be a better group member." Or *"This rubric is an efficient way of evaluating group member performance."* Five students wrote about understand group process, saying things like *"I felt the form was very useful in analyzing strengths and weaknesses in the problem solving discussion."* Or *"The form really helped prepare me for the meeting- it was good to use as a modeling guide. We rocked as a group."* Three students remarked about how the form guided their analysis of both individual behavior and the overall process. One student wrote, *"I was able to really look and see if the members of the group completed certain roles and/or tasks. Furthermore, this evaluation form helped to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the group."* So overall, 19 students registered a positive opinion that the instrument helped them evaluate individual behavior, group behavior, or both.

On the other hand, some students pointed out problems or made suggestions about the form as a heuristic tool. Four students from one group commented that the form was less helpful than using an open-ended problem solving recording form that asks the observer to record the content of a group's discussion such as the problem definition, criteria, suggested solutions, and so on. Five people expressed the view that it was not helpful for judging individual behavior or group process. One wrote, *"I found the sheet to be a little confusing. Group process is so individual it is hard to follow exactly what each member contributed. For instance one member could be asking for info while clarifying the subject."* Or *"The form is nice to grade individual performance but doesn't give a good idea on how the group did."*

There were a number of comments about the experience of using the form, both positive and negative, which provide insight into its practical use. Eleven students reported no difficulty in using the form. For instance, *"The evaluation forms are relatively simple to do. Of course, it is much easier to evaluate someone else's group than your own. But overall, it was fairly easy."* And *"This is an effective form it asks all the right questions."* Nine students remarked negatively about practical use of the form. They wrote, *"I had trouble with a few of the categories, wavering between one number or another. I think this would get better with practice though."* And *"The evaluation form does not give adequate information in fully determining what a member actually does or doesn't do to participate. However the form itself was easy to understand and to fill out."* Five of the nine comments called for some place on the form to write notes. For instance, *"The evaluation form should provide a chance to have us add comments rather than judge participation levels primarily on a yes/no and number system."* And *"The only thing I see that could be added is a space to write in some notes. Perhaps there are some points or details that we particularly want to note."*

Conclusions

How well does the SGC instrument meet the expectations I stated earlier for a learning tool? More than two thirds of the respondents pointed out its value for identifying and evaluating individual behavior or group problem-solving process. This is strong evidence that students viewed the instrument as helpful for teaching them problem-solving competencies. A few students, though, noted a difficulty with making fine discriminations between number ratings. Likewise, most students reported no problem coding member behaviors though a few mentioned the fact that some behaviors seemed to overlap competence categories. Perhaps these problems could be solved by providing operational definitions of the various levels of performance associated with each of the nine competencies.

How well does the SGC instrument meet the expectation of practicality? Given the largely positive student response toward the instrument, the hour and a quarter we spent in class learning the instrument was a modest investment in time. Turning to the student view of the instrument's practicality, a little over half of the respondents reported no difficulty using it. Most of students who did report some difficulty wanted to add a place for remarks about either individual behavior or group process in order to say what they wanted to say. This viewpoint highlights the dialectic that exists between quantitative and qualitative approaches, and the need to strike a balance between overly precise measurements at one extreme and rambling commentary at the other.

To extend the field test reported in this paper it might be useful to add the revisions suggested by the students' comments and retest the instrument. Beyond that, we might examine various methods of teaching both students and instructors to use the instrument with optimum reliability.

Any instrument intended to guide learners through the process of evaluating complex behavior will have its limitations. The SGC instrument appears to meet that challenge well, with modest limitations. Overall, it appears to have considerable value for helping students acquire small group problem-solving competencies.

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Signature: Lawrence S. Albert	Printed Name/Position/Title: LAWRENCE S. ALBERT, PROFESSOR OF SPEECH COMM.
Organization/Address: Breckinridge Hall Morehead State University, Morehead Ky	Telephone: 606-783-2510 / Fax:
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